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The Wisdom of Israel, 1947.

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WRHS
THE WISDOM OF ISRAEL

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, April 20, 1947

When one goes prospecting in the fields of Jewish ethics, such fields as one finds in these Sayings of the Fathers, the ethical teachings of the early Rabbis found in the Mishnah, one comes upon many rich nuggets of precious wisdom, and one is impressed as one reads these ethical maxims of our teachers of old with their remarkable practical sanity and dependable soundness and common sense and utter sobriety.

The ethics of the Rabbis, and Jewish ethics generally, are not derived from any philosophic or metaphysical speculations, and are not based on any artificial formula such as, for example, the ethics of the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, which is systematized, built into a symmetrical order and based upon a fundamental formula from which all ethical doctrine is derived. Aristotle called that doctrine the "Doctrine of the Mean", the middle way. The Greeks were generally impressed with the idea of order, proportion, measure, in all things. They called it "Mesotes" — the middle, the middle of the road. On the great shrine, the Delphic oracle, there was inscribed the famous words "Meden Agan" — "Nothing in Excess." Virtuous conduct to them is a balance. Evil is excess or deficiency. Virtue is the balance between the two extremes.

This formula of the Greeks, especially of Aristotle, who gave them the philosophic formula, is very impressive, but is not quite adequate. This formula suggests that virtue is arrived at by striking an average between two kinds of excesses and by adopting a moderate amount of feeling or action.

But it does not provide for what is after all basic in an ethical life — the urge to be ethical, the drive to truth and to duty. It does not explain — this formula "Not in Excess" — the extreme of self-sacrifice, of martyrdom by which the cause of mankind is advanced time and again. Nor does it include such virtues as humility, forgiveness, self-abnegation, piety which are such dominant strands both in the pattern of Jewish and Christian ethics.

Judaism is not so much concerned with a comprehensive formula as a guide to ethical conduct as it was persuaded that no such formula was available. Man's relation to himself, to society and to the universe was too vast, difficult and complicated to be

contained within a simple formula framework. Judaism did set before man as a sort of over all challenging goal which concededly could not ever be reached which gave man a sense of general guidance, general direction. Judaism called that "imitation of God." That is to say, to take the supreme idealism of which mankind is capable which is reflected in mankind's conception of his God and use that as a model for his thoughts feelings and actions. "Be ye Holy, for I, the Lord your God am Holy." "Even as you ascribe mercifulness to God, practice mercy in your own life." Seek to exemplify it in your own life."

Judaism was not captivated by the idea of symmetry and beauty in the coordinated and well-balanced ethical action. It was far more concerned with the inner motives of men, with the ethical aspirations, the upward strivings of the human soul, the striving toward perfection. Therefore the ideal man in Judaism, the one who occupied the supreme position, the most appreciated was not the Zakik, not the righteous man, who obeyed every commandment, but the Hasid, the pious man. The Hasid was of a higher class than the Zadik. The Hasid is a man who not only obeys the letter of the law, but who goes, as the Rabbis said, "beyond the border of the Law." The Hasid is the man who aspires to a superior kind of good life. "Sanctify thyself even in matters which are permitted to thee." That was the slogan of the Hasid. And in the life of the Hasid there was a deeper intentness, a more passionate and mystic quality about his actions and his feelings and in his religious thoughts.

Thus, for example, in the ethics of the Fathers, we read this interesting thought. "A man who believes that "what is mine is mine, and what is thine is thine" is a perfectly proper, righteous human being. He doesn't claim anything that does not belong to him. He does not wish to take anything that belongs to you. The Hasid is the man who says: "What I have is also thine even though what you have is yours." The Hasid is more content, more humble, more charitable, more scrupulous in inavoiding possible injury to his fellow men. He does not insist on a strict interpretation of the law when it is to the disadvantage of the law, although many righteous men may insist upon it. In other words, the Hasid seeks to imitate those

qualities which are ascribed to his God. A famous Rabbi said the 145th Psalm explained exactly the difference: " God is just, righteous, a Zadik in all his ways. But he is a Hasid in His acts." That is to say, at the beginning, God is just, but in the end he deals with his world like a Hasid on the principle not of justice, but of mercy." For the world, owing to man's frailty could not exist by the strict enforcement of the law. So that Judaism has an ethical ideal which goes beyond this well-balanced, symmetrical middle course which Greek thought regarded as the formula for the ethical life.

The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, who lived in the 12th century, a great disciple of Aristotle, sought to harmonize that thought with Greek thought. He sought to apply the Aristotelian thought of the Golden mean to Jewish ethics. In his eight chapters, Maimonides' introduction of the Pirke Avoth, he gives a very profound interpretation of Jewish ethics. Maimonides does not of course depreciate the Hasid who does not maintain this exact balance between two extremes. He seeks to explain his action, that his conduct, his caution and his restraint is due to his desire to restore the health of his soul. But for the majority of mankind, Maimonides advises them to choose the moddle path.

Now this position of Maimonides was severely criticizes time and again by other Jewish philosophers for putting Jewish ethics in the narrow framework of Greek philosophy. For example Professor Lazerus in his great book, "Ethics of Judaism," has this to say: "It is astonishing that Maimonides should have failed to note the infinite divergence between the Aristotelian and the Jewishmoral doctrine so completely as to intermingle the two...What, we ask, has the cycle of Aristotelian virtues gracefully disporting themselves upon the path of the golden mean -- virtues that, for the most part, are no positive virtues, only the mean between two vices ; virtues regulating the decorous behavior of the educated, well-to-do Athenian; virtues utterly removed from the serious moral obligation which is of the essence of the Jewish spirit; virtues the lack of which indicates naught of abysmal guilt; the

possession of which, naught of the heavenly heights of moral purity before God -- what have these comely, amiable virtues to do with the unutterably sublime idea of divine morality? If this collection of ideas is not blasphemy-- and of blasphemy Maimonides certainly was never guilty -- then it shows absence of critical thought; it is thoughtlessness begot of the currency of Aristotelian concepts and the veneration for them."

The Greek gentleman, the Athenian aristocrat for whom Aristotle prescribed was not at all the Jewish gentleman for whom the prophets and Rabbis prescribed. In the 6th chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers, are enumerated those virtues which the perfect man, according to Jewish ethics should possess. And among these qualities which are essential to the ethical life of the perfect man are: reverence, meekness, long-suffering, a good heart, resignation under chastisement, rejoicing in one's lot, claiming no merit for oneself, loving mankind, loving ~~repentance~~ reproof, keeping oneself far from quest of glory, bearing the yoke with one's fellow men -- all of these virtues, none of which one finds in the conception of the perfect man under Aristotle's conception.

Here is the type of the ideal Athenian of Greece that Aristotle prescribes for: "The quality of highmindedness..may be taken as embodying the trait most prized in an Athenian gentleman. The highminded man claims much and deserves much; lofty in his standard of honor and excellence he accepts tributes from good men as his just desert, but despises honor from ordinary men or on trivial grounds; good and evil fortune are alike of relatively small importance. He neither seeks nor fears danger, he is ready to confer favors and forget injuries, slow to ask favors or cry for help, fearless in his love and hatred, in his truth and his independence of conduct; 'not easily moved to admiration, for nothing is great to him. He loves to possess beautiful things that bring no profit, rather than useful things that pay; for this is the characteristic of the man whose resources are in himself. Further, the character of the highminded man seems to require that his gait should be slow, his voice deep, his speech measured; for a man is not likely to be in a hurry when there are few things in which he is deeply interested, nor excited when he holds nothing to be of very great importance.

and these are the causes of a high voice and rapid movements.'"

This is the Athenian gentleman of Aristotle. He is not deeply concerned in any problem, not deeply interested in anything, certainly not moved by the wrongs and injustices of the world in the re-organization of society. That is why the Greeks never produced any prophets while they did produce great artists, philosophers. There is a great gulf between the conception of ethics which comes from Mt. Sinai and the one which comes from Olympus.

Nevertheless there is in Jewish ethics an amazing sanity and soundness which is reflected in these ethical sayings of the fathers. For example, man is urged to seek perfection. But in a man's quest for perfection, he is advised to avoid wrong turns. Take the matter of idealism. Judaism makes mandatory the ideal quest of man for perfection for it gave one some zest, lift and exaltation of life. Man was urged to work for a better self and better society.

Nevertheless, man is advised: "It is not your duty to complete the work in which you are engaged. Just as you are not free to desist from it, just as you are morally bound to engage in great human enterprises for the regeneration of mankind, just as morally you are bound to rise to higher planes of culture, nevertheless thine is not the duty to complete it. Don't break your heart over it, because you cannot see the whole, the total achievement for which you are striving. The road is long and hard. The road is endless. If you advance but one step on that road, be thankful, be comforted, be satisfied." It is good advise not to be over-enthusiastic, over-eager idealists who frequently ~~tear~~ tear themselves apart and break their hearts in the quest of great goals which are not in the reach of any one man.

✓ Again, the noblest thing in life is perfection. studying the Rabbis called it/Torah. But it meant much more. It meant the spiritual, ethical, cultural development of man in keeping with the law of . The study of the Torah they said is greater than the priesthood, greater than royalty. A man who learns the Torah enriches his life. But all this is not enough. All Torah, all self-culture which is not

tied up with work, with doing things in the end becomes futile. Mere intellectualism, mere self-perfectionism may lead to arid spiritual futility, to unctious self-sufficiency, to social enmity. What the world/^{needs} is not aloof spiritual exquisites, what the world needs is workers, builders, laborers in every field. Learning and laboring with your fellow workers you will bring more accululated wisdom and culture. It isn't study which is the important thing, but the deed. That is the sanity and the soundness of Jewish ethical approach.

Take another instance. Certainly in Judaism, faith is very important, piety, the reverence of God. That is the heart of religion according to Judaism. But even that is not enough. Blind faith may lead to all forms of spiritual aberrations. There are other areas of the human mind which might be cultivated simultaneously before man attains perfection. One must also try to acquire learning and wisdom. "A boor can never be a feeling man." "Nor can an ignorant man be a Hasid. If there is no wisdom, there is likely no reverence....."

They said that aman whose wisdom is greater than his reverence of God is like a tree, a beautiful tree with rich foliage of many branches, but of few roots, deeply rooted, and when the storm comes, the tree is topped.

Retribution, the eternal life of the herafter, the world to come -- that is often spoken of in Rabbinic Literature. The world to come figures very prominently in so much in the Bible as in later Jewish literature. They believed in immortality. They believed in eternal life. And yet a Rabbi was able to say to his disciples -- listen to this -- one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is far more important than the whole life to come. The deepest satisfactions of ethical living can be had here on this earth, in this life, and they outweigh all eternity. This is what I mean by ~~fundament~~ sound ethical sence.

Take this dictum of the Rabbis. When one seeks the good life, the Rabbis say, "one should think of himself." It is essential that one should think of himself. It

is essential that one should think of himself and look after himself. Hillel said "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" This idea of selflessness, of never thinking of yourself -- that is not good. You have got to think of yourself. Ethical life begins with one's own spirit, one's own conduct. But "if I am for myself only, what in the world am I?" What use is there in any single lonely self-centered egotistical life? A man must advance along with his fellow men. Man must try to strengthen others in order to strengthen himself in progressing through life because a man can find fulfillment of himself only in society. You might call that enlightened self-interest. Whatever you call it, it is clear that no man is complete without his social group. And so the Rabbis give you the choice between altruism and selfishness.

Take another example taken from these Sayings of the Fathers. If you want to find perfection, the ideal life, the summum bonum, the highest good in life, don't let the world absorb you too much. "Lessen thy toil for worldly goods, worldly occupation." But, the Rabbis also say: "Do not try to run away from the world in order to seek perfection, like the hermits do, or the monks because the world contains too many trials, responsibilities, etc. No, said the Rabbis, no, that is not good.....

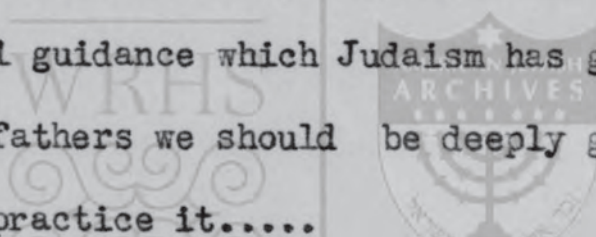
Stay in the world and seek your way in the world and make your place in the midst of life. Do not separate yourself from your community, from your congregation. Ambitions are good. A man should be ambitious. But ambitions for what? That is the important question which a man seeking perfection must answer. So the Rabbis say: Do not hanker after a table of kings for your table is greater than theirs, and your crown is nobler than theirs. Through ambition man should strive to become a perfect man, a well-rounded, good man, actively participating in the life of his community, aspiring, energetic, idealistic, practical. That is the good sound sense of Judaism. Take the matter of Communism. Judaism was never communistic. It never despised private property. "Let the property of thy neighbor be as dear to you as thine own." There is nothing wrong in possession. There is great wrong in

acquisitiveness, in exploitation. A man should share what he has of substance, knowledge, power with those who have less. Man is morally bound to seek improvement of the needy, and dispossessed. He should aspire to bring greater equality, justice in the world.

Judaism never preached the economic doctrine of cummunism. "A man who says what is yours is mone and what is mine is yours is an Am Ha'aretz."

Judaism was never pacificistic, though militarism was decried and war was deprecated and the prophets preached to their people to "beat their ~~p~~ swords into ploughshares....." Men were taught to be seekers of peace. Yet they were never taught to turn the other cheek to the smiters. They never said: "Resist not Evil". Evil must be resisted. The power to do evil must be taken out of the hands of the evil-doers.

This, my good friends is the wisdom of Israel. This is the sound, steady, dependable, practical ethical guidance which Judaism has given to man. And for that ethical guidance of our forefathers we should be deeply grateful. We should in our lives try to follow it, practice it.....



1) Remarkable - prosperity - modesty - sobriety - refusable - soundness.

It is not an ethics derived from metaph. Speculation - and based on some artificial formula. - like that of Aristotle's "doctrine of the mean".

The Greeks were impressed with the idea of "measure", "Order", "Proportion". They called it "Mesotēs" -

- Delphic Oracle - "Mēdēn Agan" - Nothing in excess.

- Virtuous conduct is a balance. Evil is excess or deficiency. Virtue is the balance bet. 2 extremes.

- The formula is impressive but not quite adequate.

- It suggests that virtue is arrived at by striking an average bet. 2 kinds of excesses, and adopting a moderate amount of feeling or action.

- It does not provide the will the drive to truth + duty.

- It does not explain those extremes of self-sacrifice and martyrdom by which the cause of mankind is so frequently advanced.

- It does not include those virtues of humility, forgiveness, piety - self-abnegation - which are not moderate - such downward strands in the gathering Jewish and Chr. ethics.

2) Judaism was not so much concerned with a comprehensive formula as a guide to ethical conduct. It was not available. The main sta-

too hurried, too exact - to the manner - ~~too~~ too
vast, too difficult, too complicated - to be contained
within a simple maxim.

① ~~Set~~ It set before man - an overall, challenging
goal - which, conceivably could not be attained, but
which gave man general guidance and direction
"imitation of God" - to all the refinement, discipline
which man is capable, reflected with consecration
of soul, and model for life after that! religion

3/ Judaism was not captivated by the idea of quantity
and beauty in the ~~well regulated~~ coordinated
and well-balanced ethical action.

It was more concerned with the ^{endless} ethical aspiration,
of the human soul, the striving to perfection.

The ideal man - not the p133 - but the 3100.
The 3100 was on a higher level > the p133 -

The 3100 is an who does more > obey the letter, the
law. He goes p133 not.

He aspires to a superior kind of behavior.

"Sanctify thyself even in that which is permitted thee"

There is a deeper intention, a personal, mystical
quality about his life and action.

- The average 'good' quality
But 3100 not the 3100 not the 3100

He is more courteous, more humble, more charitable,⁽³⁾
more scrupulous in avoiding possible injury to his
fellow men. He does not insist on the strict, literal
interpretation of the Law, when it is to the disadvantage
of his fellow.

The 3100 seeks to maintain Justice. Ps. 145. 17.
R. Huna. Justice is Justice (138) but then
at the beginning Justice is Justice. (138) but then
the end He deals with the world like a 3100 - on
the principle of mercy - Justice is Justice. For the
world, mercy to man's frailty, could not exist by the
strict enforcement of the Law.

4/ Maimonides sought to apply his theory of the
"Mean" to J. others - in his introduction - to Justice - part, his conclusion
He does not consciously depreciate the 3100 - who
does not maintain an exact balance between the 2
extremes. He explains this conduct, as due to
caution and restraint desires to protect the health of the people But it considers it unwise
for the majority of mankind to choose the
middle path. Thus on the subject of Odeteam

Justice 273

5/ Markus was entranced - in putting of ethics on a
~~major~~ ^{major} framework of Greek philosophy

Prof. Lozner - "The Ethics of Judaism" (271)

4/ The Greek gentleman - the ~~Athenian~~ ^{Athenian} ~~presented~~ ^{presented} for whom Aristotle has ethics - was
not the Jewish gentleman for whom the prophets & the
Rabbis presented

Among the qualities ~~(Greek)~~ ^(Greek) ~~which~~ ^{which} necessary for the acquisition, the

reverence - meekness - ~~modesty~~ ^{modesty} long-suffering - a
good heart - resignation under chastisement - rejoicing
in one's lot - claiming no merit for one's self - loving
mankind - loving reproof - keeping oneself far
from quest of glory - bearing the yoke ~~down~~ ^{down} with
one's fellow-men - etc.

qualities not at all ~~essential~~ ^{to the high-minded philosopher} or even valued
in (quote p. 274) whom Aristotle endowed with a different
set of qualities

7/ Never takes - sanctity - soundness - ~~etc.~~
In main quest for perfection - avoid wrong turns -
Keep to the high-way -
① Take the matter of Idealism - of main quest -

Not enough! . Blood faith ^{may lead to} ~~superstition~~. There are (6
 other ones, the human mind which must be cultivated
 to attain perfection — one must also try to acquire
 learning and wisdom.

3100 4000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000

1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000 1000

Tree

10) The Heroship ~~is~~ is often spoken of in Talm. liter.
 The World to come — Yamim Habbaim in any Rabbin
 discussion of reward & punishment.

And yet — Yamim Habbaim is not the same as the World to come.

Saw religious place their entire weight on life
 after death — preparation for eternal life.

The deepest satisfaction of ethical living can be
 had here on earth — & outweigh all eternities

11) In seeking the good life in this world it is proper to
 think of one-self. It is essential that one do so —
 We must look after ourselves — self-interest
 Selflessness ~~is not~~ self-interest —
 But — self-interest is not the same as selfishness —

Advance along with other men - ⁵Lengthen journey
by strengthening others in whose road you must seek
your fulfillment - "enlightened self interest"
No man is complete without his social group.

12/ If you seek perfection - don't let the world abuse
you too much - "lessen thy toil for worldly goods"
But do not run away from the world - ^{choose wisely} Herbert.
1523 p. 100 or 11.

- Stay in the world and make your choice ~~advice~~ ^{advice}.

your ~~main~~ ^{life} goal is your main ambition -

"Do not handle after the full keys - for you told
is greater than your crown noble & then

13/ ✓ Common, in —

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.

Peer - Peer